

# Recognition of Prior Learning Policy

## 1. Policy

- 1.1 This policy aims to provide guidance and clarity to the students, staff, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies who are involved in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
- 1.2 The University has devolved to Schools arrangement for the management and assessment of RPL, within the general policy which follows. Specific detailed requirements, which apply across the institution, are set out in the University [Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme](#).
- 1.3 RPL enables recognition of achievement from a range of activities using an appropriate assessment methodology. Provided that the assessment requirements of a given module or qualification have been met, the use of RPL is acceptable for accrediting a module or part of a programme through a process of credit transfer, within the limits specified in the University's [Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme](#).
- 1.4 Assessment of prior learning may be requested by an applicant in relation to how they meet one or more of the entry requirements of the relevant programme. RPL can be requested for admission with advanced standing. It may also be used to demonstrate equivalence of learning against module learning outcomes.

## 2. Terminology

- 2.1 The terminology used in this policy is described below;

### **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

- 2.2 The term 'recognition' - which reflects the terminology in many European countries - is used to describe the process whereby applicants of all ages and backgrounds are eligible to receive recognition and formal

credit for learning acquired in the past through formal study and through work and other life experiences.

- 2.3 RPL has two widely recognised forms: prior experiential (or informal) learning and prior certificated learning.

#### **Prior Experiential learning (PEL)**

- 2.4 Prior Experiential Learning denotes learning derived from experience which is uncertificated and not previously assessed. For example, learning from unpaid work or paid work, community activities, leisure pursuits and other informal learning experiences.

#### **Prior Certificated Learning (PCL)**

- 2.5 Prior Certificated Learning is learning that has previously been assessed in a formal learning environment, e.g. learning arising from academic and professional awards for example Higher National Diplomas, Foundation Degrees, Open University Courses, National Vocational Qualifications, and other courses at an appropriate level.
- 2.6 Certificated learning does not have to be credit-based, and most colleges and universities have a mechanism for gauging the credit value of certificated learning, from the UK or elsewhere.
- 2.7 **Advanced Standing:** The authority for a student to commence a programme of study with credit granted for components of the programme already achieved in recognition of previously completed studies and/or prior learning.
- 2.8 **Articulations:** whereby all students who satisfy academic criteria on one programme are automatically entitled on academic grounds to be admitted with advanced standing to a subsequent stage of a programme of a degree awarding body. More information can be found in the Education Partnerships Policy located in the [Quality Handbook](#).

### 3. General Principles

- 3.1 The general principle is that in the case of non-Southampton credit, RPL may be granted by the University of Southampton for:
- a) up to a maximum of one third of an undergraduate programme (60 ECTS or 120 CATS) e.g. for degrees comprising 360 credits/180 ECTS, RPL would be no more than 120 CATS/60 ECTS.
  - b) up to a maximum of one third of a Masters programme (30 ECTS or 60 CATS).
  - c) up to a maximum of one third of a one year programme (20 ECTS or 40 CATS)
- 3.2 School decisions to allow RPL outside the limitations noted above must be recommended by the School Programmes Committee for formal approval by the Academic Standards and Quality Subcommittee (AQSS).
- 3.3 RPL is an applicant/student led activity. To qualify for an award all students must be treated equitably regardless of the source of the learning that is being assessed.
- 3.4 Credit must be given only for demonstrated learning, where equivalence of learning outcomes can be demonstrated, and not for experience alone. Learning must also be of an equivalent level and volume.
- 3.5 RPL may be considered for any module within the taught components of a taught programme and not only for modules at the start of the programme.
- 3.6 All students, including those seeking to demonstrate equivalence to modules on the basis of prior learning, must meet the learning outcomes for the programme as set out in the programme specification, either through studying the programme, and/or through RPL, in order to qualify for an award. RPL claims can be achieved through PEL and/or PCL.

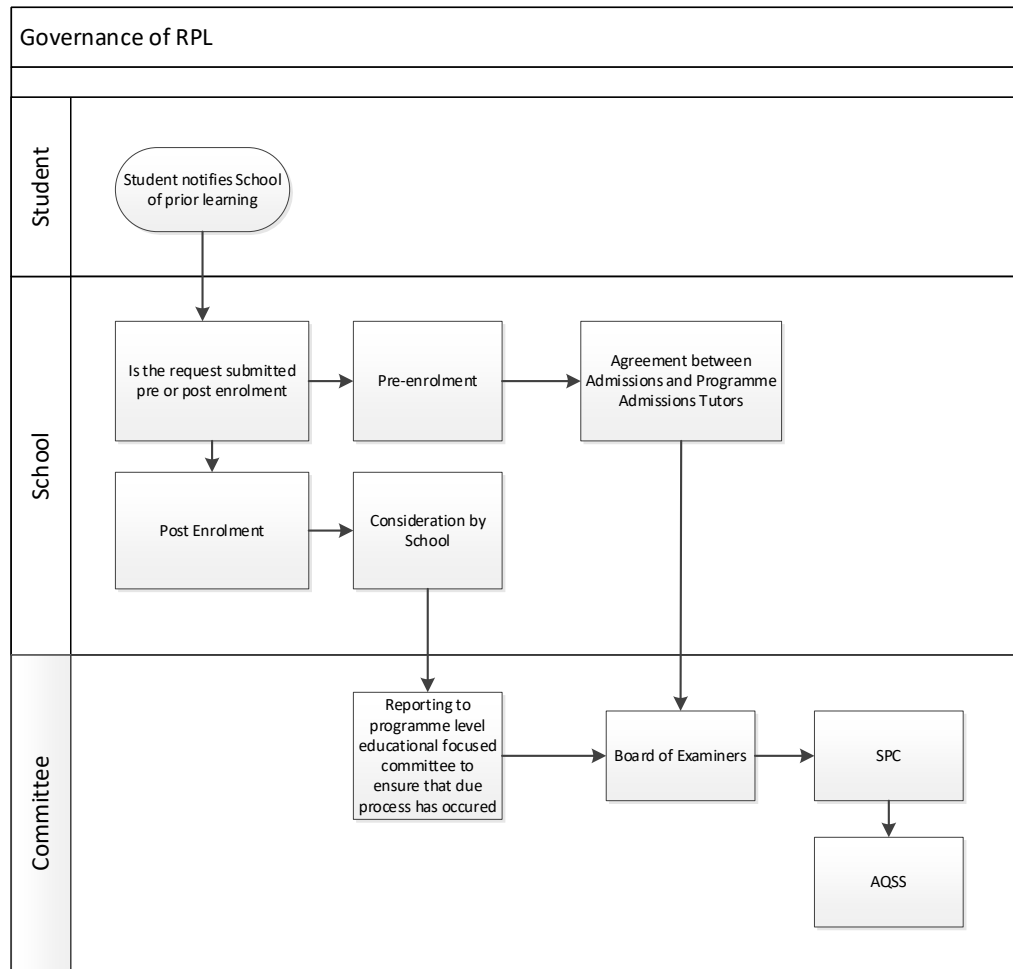
- 3.7 The RPL regulations apply to prior learning from another institution or from the University of Southampton short courses and awards that are credit bearing (PCL). If PCL is used, mechanisms must be in place to record declarations by students that the credit presented has not been used for a previous RPL claim. PCL may be awarded for progression within a single postgraduate programme from PG Certificate to PG Diploma to Masters.
- 3.8 Students wishing to transfer credit from University of Southampton short courses may only do so if the learning is deemed equivalent to meet specified programme learning outcomes and the assessment decision is endorsed by the relevant University of Southampton Board of Examiners.
- 3.9 RPL cannot be used to redeem previous failure i.e. a student who has been awarded an exit award due to failure at the higher level.
- 3.10 For programmes primarily designed to run at a single level above Level 4 (the MA, PG Certificate and PG Diploma at Level 7, the Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate at Level 6), any PCL granted should normally be at that level: e.g., only Level 7 PCL can be used toward an MA, only Level 6 PCL for the Graduate Diploma. Exceptions to this in extraordinary circumstances must be approved by AQSS.
- 3.11 PCL can be awarded irrespective of whether the credits gained previously contributed to a final award or an exit award. In other words, it is possible to 're-use' credits that have already been used towards some other award.
- 3.12 PCL should only be granted for studies that have been completed, and where the credit has been formally awarded by the institution.
- 3.13 Equally, the RPL policy applies to prior learning gained through experience and assessed as equivalent to programme learning outcomes.

- 3.14 The use of RPL does not alter the admission criteria for a programme, including the relevant benchmark entry criteria. Where applicable, applicants/students will also need to continue to meet the criteria required of the United Kingdom Visa and Immigration.
- 3.15 All Schools using this process in accordance with the policy must follow the procedure approved by SPC and ratified by AQSS.
- 3.16 Formal procedures must be approved by the relevant School Programmes Committee, and ratified by AQSS which must monitor which Schools have such procedures.

#### **4. Governance**

- 4.1 Schools will have in place, appropriate procedures to ensure that the consideration of claims and awarding of credit is effectively monitored and recorded. In all cases where credit is to be awarded, students must register for the RPL process. The School Programmes Committee will monitor School procedures and ensure that credit awarded is appropriate, verified and approved through the academic assessment processes.
- 4.2 Schools which do not have such procedures but wish to consider an RPL request from an individual student, on an exceptional basis, must seek advice from their Deputy Head of School (Education), Associate Dean (Education) or Head of Faculty Student Administration in the first instance.

**Diagram 1 - Governance of RPL**



4.3 The support and assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning claims is undertaken at programme level. The outcomes of this process will be recorded.

**5. Publicity**

5.1 Where Schools accept students on the basis of RPL this must be made clear in publicity materials, including information as to where prospective students can obtain advice and guidance about pursuing a claim, any fees payable, and time limits for submitting a claim.

**6. Documentation and Evidence**

6.1 Applicants and students must in all cases present evidence that learning has taken place and that equivalence can be demonstrated. Appropriate evidence may include transcripts, portfolios, essays written for the

purpose, module outlines, interviews, work-based projects, vivas or completion of the usual assessment associated with the module(s) for which equivalence is being claimed. Evidence of learning must be:

- a) Authentic
- b) Relevant
- c) Reliable
- d) Sufficient
- e) Valid
- f) Verifiable

6.2 Schools which routinely handle RPL applications are encouraged to develop a learning tariff which indicates where certificated credit from other institutions may be regarded as demonstrating equivalence to University of Southampton modules. In all cases this must be maintained as current and applicable.

## **7. Currency**

7.1 Claims for the consideration of prior learning will be considered based on learning that was obtained no more than five years previously. This period commences from the completion or certification date of when the learning took place.

7.2 In the case of Experiential learning claims, based on learning outside this time limit may be considered where a candidate is able to demonstrate evidence of continuous application, updating and relevance to their practice and the award sought.

## **8. Student advice and support**

8.1 Schools will provide advice and support for students seeking RPL, including information on the types of evidence considered acceptable and the extent of evidence required. The mechanisms for supporting

and assessing RPL claims must be fully documented and readily available to appropriate staff within Schools, as well as to potential candidates.

- 8.2 Schools are encouraged to make clear in documentation that any views of an advisor on a draft claim does not guarantee the outcome of the claim when the request is formally assessed.
- 8.3 The extent of support available will be specified in advance to RPL applicants, including where there may be limits on that support (e.g. a specified number of hours tutorial guidance).
- 8.4 Schools will be aware that it may be necessary to provide additional advice for students for whom English is not their first language – for example about responsibilities for any translation required. It is however the student’s responsibility to prepare and submit their application in line with required procedures and deadlines.
- 8.5 Schools must be aware that it may be necessary to vary arrangements, for example for vivas, where students have particular communication needs or other special requirements

## 9. **Payment of fees**

- 9.1 A charge may be levied for consideration of RPL. The charge may vary according to
  - a) the nature of the claim, and
  - b) the level of support that is required, e.g. to enable a student to put together a portfolio as determined by each School.
- 9.2 Charges will be clearly stated in publicity material and communicated to applicants prior to submission of evidence.
- 9.3 Schools have the power to remit fees in certain circumstances, e.g. a student makes a claim of hardship.



9.4 Where there is potential cross-over of students between Schools within the University, it is advised that they consider the harmonisation of charges to avoid internal competition on a financial basis.

9.5 Where RPL is being granted for credit gained at the University of Southampton, this fee may be waived at the discretion of the School.

## **10. Timescales**

10.1 It is expected that all claims will have been received and considered before the start of the final taught module on the programme.

10.2 Claims must be submitted within 8 weeks of registration for RPL unless specific programme regulations/structure preclude this.

## **11. Staff Development**

11.1 Schools which handle RPL requests as a normal part of their processes must provide appropriate staff development opportunities for staff engaged in advising on or assessing RPL claims.

## **12. Assessment of Claims**

12.1 Any decision on allowing RPL must be considered in accordance with the relevant programme regulations.

12.2 Contacts for RPL within each School must be clearly identified. These contacts may be Programme/Pathway Leads or other roles with a wider School remit. The Deputy Head of School (Education) is responsible for the quality assurance and monitoring of RPL processes at School level.

12.3 Colleagues designated to advise students on the preparation and submission of claims must not be involved in the assessment of the claim, except where expertise in advising about claims and assessing their worth is limited to very small numbers of staff.

12.4 The evidence assessed for the module or part of programme must be sufficient to cover the learning outcomes for the module or part. Evidence that does not meet these fully will require augmentation to

generate sufficiency. This may necessitate additional assessment methods to be made available.

12.5 Mechanisms for assessing prior learning must be rigorous in ensuring that the learning which has taken place and is presented as RPL is equivalent to the learning that would have otherwise occurred had the student studied all elements of the programme of study without RPL i.e. that equivalent learning outcomes have been met.

12.6 Schools must have procedures in place to allow for the resubmission of unsuccessful RPL claims in line with University Assessment Regulations.

12.7 Records must be kept about the rationale for RPL decisions. RPL applications must be reported to School Programmes Committee via the governance arrangements and ratification of the Board of Examiners.

12.8 The student's transcript or diploma supplement must clearly identify where Credit has been awarded for elements of a programme that have been achieved on the basis of prior learning rather than study of the module(s).

### **13. Grading, Contribution to Classification and Certification**

13.1 Prior learning accredited or recognised in line with this framework will not be graded.

13.2 If the mark for the module(s) concerned would normally contribute to the student's final award classification the average will be based on the modules taken at the University of Southampton only.

13.3 In cases where a University of Southampton Award is made (for instance, those who have been awarded a PG Certificate and left, but now wish to proceed to a PG Diploma) the mark for the modules concerned would normally contribute to the student's final award classification.

13.4 If a student is awarded RPL for courses taken outside the University, they will not have to register for or take the modules against which credit has been given. Instead, their student record will record the

number and level of credits for which RPL has been received and this will be shown as RPL on any transcript which the student may be given. The modules awarded and accepted by the RPL route will be shown as having been passed but a percentage mark will not be recorded.

#### **14. Monitoring and Enhancement**

14.1 RPL claims must be available for scrutiny by external examiners in accordance with normal School procedures for assessed work.

14.2 Schools are encouraged to share good practice in RPL developments both within their Faculties, where appropriate, and across the institution.

14.3 Schools are encouraged to monitor RPL activities by seeking feedback from RPL applicants about their experience of the process and by monitoring specifically the progress of students admitted using these procedures.

#### **15. Appeals**

15.1 School procedures must make clear that students have the right to request a review of the conduct of the process for considering an RPL process, using normal university procedures; however there is no appeal against the final decision as this is a matter of academic judgement.

15.2 Appeals can therefore only be based on material administrative error, regulatory irregularity, or other material irregularity.

15.3 In line with the University's complaints process, complaints in relation to RPL decisions will only be considered on the grounds of procedural error or unreasonable conclusions of the initial investigation of the complaint or if any additional evidence is available that was not available at the time or the original complaint.

#### **16. University Commitment**

16.1 The University will at all times seek to operate its RPL procedures in ways that are fair and are in accordance with the law of the United

Kingdom, and the University’s Charter, Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations. This includes specific compliance with legislation relating to discrimination (e.g. Race Relations Amendment Act, Sex Discrimination Act and the Disability Discrimination Act) and the University’s Equal Opportunities Policy Statement. This includes a commitment that the University will ‘actively assist groups that experience disadvantage in education and employment to benefit from belonging to the University’ and ‘actively seek to widen participation to enable students that do not traditionally participate in Higher Education to do so’.

## 17. Resources

### 17.1 Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education (2021)

<http://www.seec.org.uk/>

### 17.2 The University’s [Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme](#)

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**Diagram 2 - RPL Overview Process**

